

A HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE MINISTRY'S TEACHING ON THE PRACTICE OF THE CHURCH AND ITS ADMINISTRATION

Whenever we seek to understand a truth from the Bible, we must take care of the principle of "here a little, there a little" (Isa. 28:10) and of caring for, but not being limited to, the background of the words spoken. The principle of "here a little, there a little" means that no truth is completely unveiled in one passage of the Word. Rather, we need to look at the full breadth of the divine revelation, not at isolated statements. Furthermore, understanding the background of a book of the Bible greatly informs our understanding of what that book says. For example, while what is written in the New Testament Epistles is universally applicable (1 Cor. 4:17; 7:17), each Epistle was written to address a particular situation. Without understanding those situations, we will not be able to fully grasp the significance of the apostles' writing.

The same principles apply to understanding the ministry in the Lord's recovery. To treat the ministry of our brothers Watchman Nee and Witness Lee on the practice of the church fairly, we must not take fragments of their teaching selectively, according to our own tastes, biases, or agenda. Moreover, while the biblical principles that they taught apply to all the local churches at every time and in every place, their speaking was often related to a context that informed their ministry on a particular aspect of church practice at a given time. This becomes evident as we trace the history of our brothers' ministry concerning the practice of the church and of its administration in particular.

Brother Nee received much help from the British Brethren, particularly the writings of John Nelson Darby, a leader among those who became known as the Exclusive Brethren. In 1932 a group of Exclusive Brethren visited the churches in Shanghai and Foochow (Fuzhou). Brother Nee then visited England at their invitation the following year. On that trip he also met with T. Austin-Sparks, an independent, deeper life minister. In 1934, after his return to China, Brother Nee gave the messages that became *The Assembly Life*. Realizing that the concepts of both the Brethren and of Austin-Sparks did not match the biblical model for the practice of the church, Brother Nee laid out what the local churches had practiced from their inception in 1922. Those messages were the first extended exposition on the practice of the church life, including the boundary of the local church.

In 1937, first in Shanghai and then repeated in Hankow, he gave an expanded explanation of the New Testament practice of the church. The latter messages were translated into English and published in 1939 under the title *Concerning Our Missions*. This book, which is now known as *The Normal Christian Church Life*, pointed out the failings of both the practice of the Brethren and of congregations associated with particular works or ministries, whether denominational or independent. He also clearly showed the relationship among the churches, the ministry, and the work, all of which function in harmony in the one Body of Christ. At that time he used the word *independent* to describe the administration of a local church, meaning that it was not answerable to a mission board, denominational headquarters, head church, or any other organizational entity.

Due to a turmoil in the church, Brother Nee suspended his public ministry from 1942 to 1948. When he resumed his ministry he spoke the messages published in *Church Affairs*. In one of those messages he corrected a misunderstanding some promoted based on his messages from 1937, namely, that after the apostles appoint elders, the elders do not need to listen to the apostles. Brother Nee said simply, "This is impossible." He then explained that the apostles are the ones to both appoint and remove elders (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee [CWWN], Vol. 51: Church Affairs, 143*). Between 1948 and 1951 Brother Nee also gave the messages later compiled into *Further Talks on the Church Life*.¹ After the disruption caused by the Second Sino-Japanese War (1931-1945) and the ensuing large influx of believers into the local churches, Brother Nee's ministry in these messages laid a solid foundation concerning matters including the ground of the church, the content of the church, the unity of the church, and the service of the church.

Through Brother Nee's work and ministry, a number of local churches were raised up outside mainland China. In the 1950s, following the Communist revolution in China, the number of saints in the churches outside China swelled, particularly in Taiwan, where tens of thousands were saved through the gospel. On two occasions, in 1955 and 1957, T. Austin-Sparks was invited to Taiwan to render spiritual help to the saints there. On his second visit he sought to undermine the ground of the church, which was foundational to the Lord's move in His recovery. In Austin-Sparks' way,

¹ These messages were published in English in 1968 to disprove claims that Brother Nee had abandoned the local ground in his later teaching.

ministry was central, not the church, but Brother Lee knew from the Word that the church is the center of God's plan and that the ministry is for the building up of the church (Eph. 4:12). Brother Lee spent months to help the saints know both the local ground and the proper relationship between the ministry and the church.²

Despite his labors, some gifted, young, and immature co-workers adopted Austin-Sparks' view and caused a great turmoil and loss among the churches in Taiwan. In 1965 Brother Lee responded to the pleas of the elders in Taiwan and returned to clear up that situation. While he was there he spoke clearly regarding the ongoing relationship between the apostles and the churches and the responsibility of the apostles to deal with problems in a church's eldership (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee, 1965, vol. 4, 163-196*).

Another turmoil broke out in 1978, caused by an ambitious worker, Max Rapoport, who sought to build up a hierarchical structure. This worker attempted to overturn entire elderships and install brothers loyal to him. In a series titled *Truth Messages* Brother Lee plainly told the saints that anyone who acquiesced to such usurpation of the headship of Christ was not practicing the truth. However, to use Brother Lee's word to say that the apostles have absolutely no authority to deal with problems in a local church is not faithful to the entire scope of the ministry of Brother Nee and Brother Lee or to the full text of what Brother Lee said:

According to my knowledge of the New Testament, the apostles have no authority in themselves to control the churches. Only the word ministered by them has authority. If the churches and the saints go on according to the Word, according to God's oracle, the apostles have no authority to touch the churches. But if a church goes astray or is misled, then the apostles have the obligation and responsibility to deal with the situation according to God's word, which has authority. (*Truth Messages, 34-35*)

In a hierarchical organization, each level has line authority over those who are lower on the organization chart to exercise control over the entire organizational tree. This concept is foreign to the Bible. The Body of Christ is an organism in which there is no hierarchy of God, Christ, apostles, elders, and common saints. Nevertheless, the apostles are responsible before God to correct misconduct by local elders or severe disorder in a church (1 Tim. 5:19; 1 Cor. 11:34).

In the late 1980s another rebellion arose, led by John Ingalls and others, this time promoting the view that every local church is an independent autonomy. At that time and in the years that followed, Brother Lee again spoke concerning the apostles' ongoing relationship with the church and their responsibility to deal with problems in a church's eldership. He also made clear that any concept of absolute independence or autonomy was organizational and contrary to the organic oneness and nature of the Body of Christ (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee, 1988, vols. 3 and 4; 1989, vols. 1, 3, and 4; 1990, vol. 2; 1991-1992, vols. 2 and 4; 1993, vols. 1 and 2; 1997, vol. 2*).

This brief survey demonstrates the importance of taking the words of the ministry as a whole and not selecting only those portions that suit us. It also shows the value of understanding the historical context in which certain words were spoken. Doing these things gives us a broad and balanced view of the practice of the church life and its administration. A proper church is one that stands on the local ground. Its administration is committed to a group of elders appointed by the apostles. The elders do not look at their church as their domain to exercise authority independently, but they administer their church in view of and in the fellowship of the organic Body of Christ. As long as the elders conduct themselves properly, the apostles do not directly intervene in the church's affairs, though they may still teach, train, and exhort both the elders and the church (Eph. 4:11-12; 2 Tim. 2:22; Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Tim. 4:13). However, if the elders abuse their authority or neglect their responsibility, the apostles have the right and responsibility to intervene. In all these things we will be safeguarded if we see that the Body of Christ is not an organization but an organism.

² In 1957 alone Brother Lee shared the following message series:

The Faith, Testimony, and Ground of the Church

The Recovery and Practice of the Testimony of the Church

The Ground of the Church and the Service of the Body

The Testimony and the Ground of the Church

The Administration of the Church and the Ministry of the Word

The Supply of the Word, Shepherding, and the Administration Needed for the Building Up of the Church

The Ground of the Church and the Ministry That Builds Up the Church